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Critics Shelling Fort McNamara

By Marquis Childs

THE VOLLEYS fired from Capitol Hill across the Potomac at the man in the Pentagon are slightly off target. What is more, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara seems not in the least disturbed as the shot and shell fall around him.

Of all the strange aspects of perhaps the strangest war in America's history, the conflict between McNamara and his congressional critics ranks high. The conflict in and of itself is more of the same. Civilian secretaries have traditionally been the target for political critics.

But with McNamara determined to hold down costs and his congressional attackers bent on forcing him to spend more, it is the reversal of the traditional roles that makes this remarkable. Even those who talk loudest about economy have been helping to load the defense budget with a half billion to a billion dollars of unwanted money. The Secretary is, of course, not compelled to spend funds that Congress appropriates above budgeted requests.

After a week's vacation climbing Mt. Rainier—a characteristic relaxation for McNamara—he will pick up the pruning shears again to cut costs still further. So confident is the Secretary in his estimate of the number of planes likely to be lost in the current fiscal year that he means to cut back production schedules. How—and where—the cutting will be done is still a carefully guarded secret. In testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee, he put the probable loss at 580 planes.

WHILE IT is an oversimplification, the fundamental difference between McNamara and his congressional critics is that he believes the Vietnam conflict can be kept a limited war as against the view of those in Congress who want to pull out all the stops. Thus far the President has given unqualified support to his Secretary of Defense, whom he rarely fails to praise in glowing terms.

It is not that McNamara is unaware of the escalating cost of the Vietnam war. He is engaged in calculating how much of a supplemental appropriation he will have to call on Congress for,

and until all the returns are in, he will not give even a general estimate of how many billions will be in this added bill.

Until recently he had been confident that he could put off the grim day until early January. Now there is some doubt as, with the movement of troops up to 350,000 into Vietnam, the costs mount correspondingly. Congress, called back into session after the Nov. 8 election to vote the additional billions, might also be called on for a tax increase to pay for it.

Figures are by no means McNamara's sole preoccupation. He is making a speech in New York next Tuesday reportedly going to the heart of the most sensitive of all problems—manpower, the draft and the demand of his Senate critics that reservists be called up. He is likely to enlarge on the concept of national service for all youths, a proposal in his talk to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Montreal in May that touched off loud repercussions.

So much stress does the Secretary put on this speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars that his own early drafts are rated top secret and locked in his private safe.

“AS MATTERS STAND,” McNamara said at Montreal, “our present Selective Service system draws on only a minority of eligible young men. That is an inequity. It seems to me we could move toward remedying that inequity by asking every young person in the United States to give two years of service to his country—whether in one of the military services, in the Peace Corps, or in some other volunteer developmental work at home or abroad.”

He added that there were those who said such a proposal was inappropriate in the middle of a shooting war but that he believed precisely the opposite was the case. With American youths called on for universal service, we would show that we meant what we said about the central concept of security—a world of decency and development, in his words, where every man can feel that his personal horizon is rimmed with hope. At one extreme, his critics on the left charged that he proposed to put the whole nation in uniform.

Again and again McNamara has shown that he is a rarity in the Johnson Administration. Above all, this is because of his readiness to supply fresh thinking for old problems even as he tries to hold a tight rein on the wild horses in the Pentagon. Who is man? he asks. And he answers with his own conviction that he is a rational animal with a near infinite capacity for folly.